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Contested Passages:
Migrants and Borders in the Río Grande
and the Mediterranean Sea

Moroccan journalist Rachid Nini claims in *Diario de un ilegal* (*An Illegal's Journal*) that the Mediterranean Sea never loses its temper,¹ but the calm waters of this narrow strip separating Spain from the northern coast of Africa are one of the most deadly international borders; more so, in fact, than the line separating the United States from Mexico.

The news makes the headlines almost every morning: a *patera* has been intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean; some of the travelers manage to reach the Spanish side, some are engulfed in the treacherous waters. The *patera*, the fragile, half-rotten boat frequently used for the crossing, is about six meters long and three meters wide. Made of low-quality planks and put together at the very last minute (and often in the desert) to avoid detection, the *patera* is the disposable means for reaching the other side. Usually it is filled up with passengers to make the trip profitable. Few of its occupants can swim, and none can sail.² Between six hundred and a thousand migrants drown every year, according to statistics.³ This strait varies with tides and clear nights; it becomes slightly thinner in the summer and widens in

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the winter. Yet the border becomes wider and wider as new waves of immigrants choose the Canary Islands as their destination in order to avoid the heavily policed beaches of southern Spain. Consequently, the trip has turned more perilous. Gone are the Mediterranean ride and the five-hour crossing. Now immigrants have to negotiate the perilous waters of the Atlantic and about twenty hours of uncertainty.⁴

The strait and Atlantic journeys have become two versions of Spain's Río Grande, the last and most dangerous obstacle between the third and first worlds.⁵ There are more parallels as well: The crossing of the U.S.-Mexican border finds a direct counterpart in the night assaults on the recently reinforced double fence separating Ceuta and Melilla, two autonomous Spanish cities in North Africa, from Morocco. Although the barbed-wire boundary has been raised to six meters, night after night the migrants try to break the fence at both its highest and lowest stretches, thus undermining the attempts of Spanish police to contain the hundreds of Africans trying to enter Spanish territory. The different strands of the comparison capture some of the aspects I would like to address in this essay: They identify an unstoppable process whereby waves of migrants are crossing into different versions of the promised land in order to realize the American/European Dream; they also point to migratory flows which, coming from the South, redefine and challenge the contours of the host countries. Interestingly, these migration patterns from the South repeat and revisit previous historical tracks and presences in both the United States and Spain.

As markers of "spatial historicities,"⁶ both national borders mark the two nations' spatial and temporal limits, preferably closed and finished, but they also encapsulate and delimit national narrations. For the border is not concerned only with space; it is not only a spatial line but also a temporal boundary that graphically represents and actualizes the flow and the progression of history.⁷ History has traditionally established and consolidated geographical, religious, cultural, and economic borders. The resulting boundaries have not only acted as lines differentiating nations and identities but have also established a hierarchy within difference. East has been set up against West; North against South,⁸ the present as opposed to the past. Significantly, in the case of the United States and Spain, neither country has perceived any "upgrading" of national identity by claiming proximity to a third-world country to the south.⁹ The southern borders in the United States and Spain may actually function as a bastion against a common history and the threat of a "downgrading" of national identity. The need to reinforce the southern

boundary also signals to what extent so-called “civilization” needs to defend itself from that history, barbaric and regressive, which threatens to engulf progress.

Contested Passages

Both the U.S.-Mexican border and the Spanish-African strait are supposed to be impenetrable separations between first and third worlds, between the American Dream and what Rubén Martínez calls a “Mexican Manifest Destiny” that expects to be realized on American streets paved with gold.¹⁰ Similarly, the strait separating Spain from Africa is, for contemporary Moroccan writer Mahi Binebine, “the abyss of the world,”¹¹ the most dangerous obstacle separating a dilapidated continent from a European Dream produced and reproduced by television images. The “abyss” is especially revealing in economic terms, for Spanish salaries are twelve times higher than Moroccan ones, and the difference becomes more acute if we compare Spain with the vast majority of West Africa.¹² Alfred Arteaga’s description of the U.S. border as an infinitely thin line that supposedly differentiates the haves from the have-nots, those who are supposedly legitimately rich from those who are (also rightfully) poor of their own accord,¹³ seems especially apt for the description of the Spanish-African border. Further, and despite the cultural and historical specificities,¹⁴ it is possible to argue that both lines illustrate a paradoxical double desire on the part of the host countries: The desire for a sealed border that instills confidence in national definition and national identity is simultaneous to the desire for a cheap and submissive workforce, which has boosted agricultural economies in both countries. In both cases, the roots of the desire to migrate, so often questioned by the citizens of the host countries, are no mystery. Mexican migrants express their despair in these terms: “Prefiero morir que seguir con la miseria que tengo allí.”¹⁵ Africans voice their predicament in similar words: “Prefiero estar encerrado en una habitación, en una cárcel en Europa, donde una vez al día me traerán comida, que seguir viviendo en África, y sobre todo en Marruecos. Esto es el infierno y Europa sera el paraíso.”¹⁶

Both the U.S.-Mexican border and the line between Spain and North Africa represent specific historical and spatial markers that go beyond the notion of the geographical line, for these southern borders are intrinsically different from other international boundaries. America’s 4,000-mile-long border with Canada is basically defended by a couple of fire trucks, and, at

least until 9/11, it was commonly agreed that was sufficient; the southern border, though half as long, has the equivalent of an army division patrolling it, and many U.S. citizens think it should be watched and patrolled more closely.¹⁷ A similar difference can be perceived in the borders that separate Spain from Portugal and France, on the one hand, and from Africa, on the other. While the European Union has favored the dismantling of boundaries among its members, it has also reinforced the policing of the thin line that divides the continent from Africa through the signing of the Schengen Agreement in 1991. In a way, Spain has become a faulty and porous “Great Wall of Europe,” the boundary that separates countries but also the locus that defines and secures the integrity of a continent against other mores, cultures, and economies. Only a closed line with the poorer, alien neighbor can presumably secure a fixed, stable, and finished identity.

There are also similarities in what we can call “border dynamics.” Both boundaries are heavily traversed; they have their own coyotes and intermediaries in charge of recruiting new migrants, as well as a series of codes that have to be carefully observed before initiating the journey. Like a rite of initiation with no return, the crossing starts in Tangier or Tetuan on the African coast, or at busy bus stations in Mexico. But the journey as a whole may start much farther south, in countries such as Mali, Nigeria, or Senegal, or in Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador. Africans may walk through the continent for a couple of years before they reach Morocco and find themselves at the gate of Europe. The money paid for the passage on the African route varies radically depending on the kind of boat or the shade of one’s skin—racism in misery, as Alí Lmrabet calls it¹⁸—but it often requires the passenger’s (and his or her family’s) life savings; a different sum is charged for braving military positions on the coast.¹⁹ On the Mexican side, things are no easier. If you can’t pass as *tijuanense*, Luis Alberto Urrea writes, you are singled out automatically: Salvadorans and Guatemalans are regularly beaten up, while Indians are insulted and pushed around.²⁰ Deception is frequent on both routes. On the Mexican American migration trail, abusive coyotes can use crossers as slaves and can traffic them as indentured servants.²¹ Sub-Saharan Africans may be returned to deserted beaches in Tangier and told they are now in Spain. An insidious scheme came out into the open in June 2005: It became clear that coyotes had sent out two *pateras*, one of which was filled with sub-Saharans as a red herring to attract the attention of the authorities. When this boat shipwrecked right after departure, some of the passengers managed to swim back to the beach, but most

of the women who were traveling with children had a tragic end. The other *patera*, which was regularly furnished, managed to go undetected in the middle of the tragedy.²² In 2001 the Red Cross revealed that the mafias operating in the Strait region give crossers vouchers that are valid for a number of attempts.²³ The trip on the *patera* itself harbors unexpected dangers: If a component of the engine gas gets in contact with the salty water deposited in the boat, the deadly chemical reaction may burn the occupants' lungs.²⁴

Despite of the dangers, though, 75 percent of Moroccans are ready to leave their country, writes Lmrabet.²⁵ Every day more than 800,000 people legally cross the border between Mexico and the United States, not to count the 4,600 or so who hop the fence and get caught almost right away.²⁶ Spanish and especially Andalusian TV stations show the bodies of Africans washed up on Spanish southern shores or on the Canary Islands almost daily. Luckier ones struggle to get ashore, barefoot, disoriented, and cold. Interestingly, there are Good Samaritan figures on each route. Father Luiz Kendzienski, originally from Brazil, runs *la casa el emigrante* in Tijuana, as if to counteract the effect of Operation Gatekeeper.²⁷ A volunteer group called Humane Borders erects emergency watering stations in the Sonoran Desert to help crossers on their way north. Father Robert Carney, a priest in Douglass, Arizona, holds prayer vigils at border-crossing points and often goes out into the desert to offer migrants toiletry kits and water bottles. Another important figure on this route is Reverend John Fife, an activist in Tucson, who harbors immigrants in his Presbyterian church.²⁸ These figures have their counterparts on the African route to Spain: The Franciscan Isidoro Macías, better known as "Padre Pateras," has run a sanctuary for African women since five Nigerian women arrived at the refuge in 1999.²⁹ There are other anonymous Good Samaritans who aid immigrants in southern Spain, where the citizens have organized networks to protect immigrants from police detection. Part of that invisible organization is another priest, Father Andrés Avelino, who gives newcomers sanctuary in his church in the coastal city of Algeciras.³⁰

The uncertainties as to the outcome of the voyage itself remain in both crossings, more so with the current process of "widening" the border, as policies are enforced in order to deter migrants. The new waves of migrants prefer the less policed, longer route to the Canary Islands from the western coast of the Sahara Desert; consequently, the trip is becoming costlier and increasingly dangerous. Due to the almost daily assaults on the double fence separating Ceuta and Melilla from Morocco, Spanish authori-

ties have announced the construction of yet another palisade, which will stitch metals bars together around the perimeter of the exterior barbed wire fence.³¹ The U.S.-Mexican border has also widened dramatically in the last decade. After the interdiction efforts of Operation Gatekeeper, Operation Safeguard, and Operation Hold the Line, coyotes have chosen more circuitous routes, and the Border Patrol is aware of the increasing risks.³² Thus, the Border Patrol has achieved its goal of shifting migrating routes away from urban areas by herding crossers into inhospitable areas such as deserts and rivers.³³ The vigilante groups figure prominently as the last addition to a widening boundary. In their reinforcement of the border, these volunteers, many of whom are recruited over the Internet, plan to watch the border and report illegal crossings to federal agents.³⁴ Some of the members of these groups are armed and have availed themselves of the latest detection devices.³⁵ As a direct consequence of the increase and implementation of control strategies since 1993, coyotes have raised the cost of illegal entry, and the fees charged have doubled or quadrupled depending on the route and the services offered.³⁶ One consequence of this “widening” of the border is the increase in the number of migrants who die while trying to gain entry in Spain and the United States (669). Yet the question remains, How thick must the border be to contain “the Other”? Or, to put it another way, how many fences or double or triple palisades are necessary to deter “illegal” migration? What is the next border going to protect and secure? If the physical integrity of the nation is at stake in the act of transgressing its limits, so is its national narration and definition.

Fences protect from physical transgression but also from what is deemed as a forsaken national definition. If the United States has always cultivated the myth of an inviting and boundless Garden of Eden that transforms settlers/immigrants into Americans, Spain has its own history as an exporter rather than an importer of immigrants. About 3.5 million Spaniards left for the Americas between 1850 and 1950. From the 1950s through the 1970s, almost 75 percent of the migrants chose Northern Europe as a destination, a migration facilitated by the guest workers’ programs in France, Germany, and Switzerland,³⁷ yet Spaniards appear amnesic and unaware of the pain of migration. Like the new generations, they feel no shame when, on seeing an African-looking person, they exclaim: “The Moors are back.”³⁸ This phrase captures the paradoxical nature of historical memory. Spaniards cannot remember they provided a stable reservoir of cheap labor to Europe before the Civil War, as well as waves of political exiles when the

insurgent General Franco secured the so-called “national” victory. Yet the image of the Moor, defeated and expelled in 1492, remains a (traumatic) part of the national consciousness.

These two migratory flows from the South thus connect the United States and Spain with their respective histories. Mexico and the United States, on one side, and Morocco and Spain, on the other, share a common past in which cultural, linguistic, national, and racial borders are blurred: Mexicans lived in the Southwest of the United States and claim that territory as part of the mythic Aztlán; Africans lived in Spain for eight centuries and secured a stronghold on the southern part of the country, what they called Al-Andalus. Aztlán and Al-Andalus thus provide the imaginaries of Mexicans and North Africans with a historical and mythic referent that constantly conjures the inextricable presence of Mexico in the United States and of Africa in Europe.³⁹ If Europe mapped out Africa through colonialism, it is possible to argue that “Africa has been in Europe as much as Europe has been in Africa, and still is.”⁴⁰ Notwithstanding this common past, historical narratives in the United States and in Spain have always revealed a desire for erasing the migration tracks (both narrative and physical) between countries and continents, especially when the past bears witness to incursions into spaces that are now deemed sovereign. This past explains in part why, to some, Mexican immigrants represent the possibility of a “reconquest of the American Southwest.”⁴¹

Similarly, the contemporary crossing of Africans into Spanish soil may bring echoes of a second *reconquista*. As the migrants cross the border, they go through what Mary Pat Brady calls an “abjection machine” that metamorphoses them into something else, into “aliens,” “illegals,” “wet-backs,” or “undocumented,” and renders them “unintelligible (and unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human.”⁴² At the same time, it seems possible to argue that the border makes them historically abject, as it automatically historicizes Mexicans and Africans into the descendants of the “conquering aliens.” The image of the conquering Moor is especially present in the Spanish imaginary, as Rachid Nini experiences in his wanderings as an “illegal” worker. In jest, Nini tells one of his coworkers at a pizza restaurant that Africans are coming back. They do not form an army now, have no leader, but are part of a silent invasion. Centuries after the expulsion, Africans are returning only to drown in the sea, as Nini reflects in his journal. According to the images TV disseminates day after day, Morocco appears as a fleet of never-ending *pateras* and des-

perate youths who would rather die than return to their country. This is the image Spaniards find disquieting. Nini argues, though, that it is a non-stop diaspora. The Jew is not wandering anymore; he has stopped doing so, and now the time of the “wandering Arabs” has started.⁴³ Immigrants, as Nini explains in an interview and as we can witness every day, will never stop coming. All of them share a goal: to reach Spain. Whatever happens on arrival does not matter; that’s open to all kinds of possible imaginings. Potential immigrants know that there are many who return in better condition than when they left.⁴⁴ These wandering Arabs make up a new class of mobile proletariat who cross new versions of middle passages in search for new opportunities. Like the Mexicans crossing into the United States, Africans will cross as long as there are jobs, their shot at a better future. Just like the Mexican families Rubén Martínez traces in the United States, Africans will keep on coming because for them too, ideas of paradise die hard.⁴⁵

It is this repeating narrative of the past that needs to be neutralized with repeating physical borders. As the outer line of a nation and a national narrative, the border needs to be closed not only physically but also ideologically. The border is thus the locus that defines and secures the integrity of a nation. Only a closed border can presumably secure a fixed, stable, and finished national identity. This vision of the closed border/nation bears some resemblance to the concept of the classical body as expressed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*.⁴⁶ It is possible to extrapolate Bakhtin’s elaboration of the open/closed body to the exploration of the nation and national identity. Bakhtin distinguishes between the classical body/nation, which stands as an image of completeness, and the grotesque body/nation, which is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.”⁴⁷ The grotesque body, we read, “is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed” (317). Whereas the classical body is sealed from outer influences, the grotesque is permeable and “stresses elements common to the entire cosmos” (318). Classical univocality thus contrasts with grotesque duality. Bakhtin’s descriptions of the classical versus grotesque body have a suggestive applicability to the nation inasmuch as the apertures of the body can be extrapolated to the parts of the nation that are open to the outside world and allow transit. The border can be seen as a sharp line of demarcation that guards and protects an entirely finished and complete nation, but also as a porous line “through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes

out to meet the world" (26). As an open wound in the body/nation, to use Anzaldúa's terminology, the border has to be carefully watched because it needs constant care, reinforcing, and mending. This desire for closure or for the finished quality of the classical body/nation is clear in Carlos Fuentes's *La frontera de cristal*.⁴⁸ Fuentes describes the U.S.-Mexican border as an artificial line of porous contours always in the process of being both recreated and transgressed. In an illustration of Alfred Arteaga's arguments in *Chicano Poetics*, Fuentes shows how the U.S.-Mexican border instills confidence in national definition and national identity.⁴⁹ The United States may dislike illegal immigrants, but it needs them in order to create itself as a nation and to feel good about itself, as a border patroller admits in one of the tales: "Detestaba a los indocumentados. Pero los adoraba y los necesitaba. Sin ellos, maldita sea, no habría presupuesto para helicópteros, radar, poderosas luces infrarrojas nocturnas, bazucas, pistolas. . . . Que vengan. . . . Que sigan viniendo por millones, rogó, para darle sentido a mi vida. Tenemos que seguir siendo víctimas inocentes."⁵⁰ Paradoxically, the border requires border-crossers in order to perpetuate itself as a "nontransgressable" zone. The desire for a finished body/nation is therefore rendered impossible, since this image of completion and perfection is contingent and dependent on the arrival of newcomers and border-crossers.

At the border, cutting-edge technology represses the transgressors. Democracies loosen up, and the border becomes the paradigmatic site where the workings of the defensive nation are realized. If, following Eduardo Galeano's argument, we assume that "in the outskirts of the world the system reveals its true face,"⁵¹ it seems possible to maintain that the border is the outskirts of the world, where the systems that fortify the notions of nationality and national identity are truly revealed. In the different versions of the border separating the United States from Mexico, the system reveals its true policed nature; likewise, at the double, three- to six-meter-high fence separating the two Spanish cities in North Africa from the rest of the continent, the European Dream of a solid and prosperous Europe reveals its true values.⁵² "El Estrecho," the Strait separating Spain from Africa, was once described by Paul Bowles as "the center of the universe";⁵³ today it has become a tragic fracture. Yet there are not only external borders; what migrants encounter in the United States and Spain are just myriads of actual lines that have little to do with his or her alleged rebirth into the symbolic figure of contemporary dislocation.

"Mexicans/Africans are taking our jobs"

O Yes? Do they come on horses
 with rifles, and say,
 Ese Gringo, gimmee your job?
 And do you gringo, take off your ring,
 drop your wallet into a blanket
 spread over the ground, and walk away?
 — Jimmy Santiago Baca, "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from
 Americans"

Baca's poem plays on the stock image of Mexican *banditi* to undermine the solidness of the well-known refrain. "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans" presents the vacuity of what seems a universally accepted proposition that transforms Mexicans into an alien, looting force. What Baca offers instead is the result of his search: These Mexican fighters are nowhere to be seen; the only rifles to be heard are those of white farmers "shooting blacks and browns."⁵⁴ What he also sees is just the poor "marching for a little work" (139) and "trying to cross poverty to just having something" (139). This crossing frequently translates into the crossing of an elusive border of multiple nuances and inner folds. What the migrants encounter on the other side, then, hardly resembles a mythic homecoming to Aztlán or Al-Andalus. The image of the crosser who encounters a post-modern border cannot be accommodated to the inhabitant of the borderlands as a space of infinite creative potential. Instead of the contact zone, to use Mary Louise Pratt's term,⁵⁵ what migrants frequently confront is rather what Walter Dignolo has renamed as a battlefield⁵⁶ that calls into question different manifestations of utopian border thinking. Rubén Martínez has explained that Mexicans have always had an uncanny instinct for finding the soft spots of the American labor economy. Like communicating vessels, the Mexican and U.S. economies supplement each other; however, immigration policies collide with necessities. Wherever there are jobs in low-skill, low-wage industries, sooner or later Mexicans will be there. The latest wave of immigration Martínez describes works on meatpacking plants in Wisconsin, tend tomatoes in Missouri, bear the suffocating heat in greenhouse nurseries, or pick tobacco in North Carolina. As Martínez sums it up, "There is no supply of manual labor other than the Mexicans, not only for farming but increasingly for other labor-intensive industries such as meatpacking, textiles, and the bottom rungs of the service sector: hotel and res-

taurant help.”⁵⁷ As for the future of this labor force, Martínez offers a lucid analysis:

The immigrant class serves the white middle class and that is not likely to change anytime soon. It is important that this generation of migrants win dignity and respect, but the real question is what opportunities migrant children . . . will have when [they] enter the workforce. . . . Mexicans from earlier waves of migration have seen their children mostly remain in the barrio, educated in inferior schools, vulnerable to gangs and drugs, the fate of people who have no future, of families who have no mobility. (300)

The “usefulness” of the migrants is at the core of what we can call “border narratives” such as Helena Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Cafe” and *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Viramontes’s novel provides a key image for the understanding of the role of so-called “illegals” in contemporary societies. As one of the workers at the camp explains to Estrella, Viramontes’s protagonist, “Millions of years ago, the dead animals and plants fell to the bottom of the sea”⁵⁸ and made oil. The gradual unpacking of the fuel metaphor constitutes Estrella’s realization of her role and her value as a migrant worker, as well as her awareness of the dynamics of economic exploitation on the fields. As Viramontes’s young protagonist dissects the metaphor, she realizes that “it was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones” (148). The trope is a crucial one in that it introduces what Pat Mora terms “the principle of permutation,” that is, the process through which one thing is transformed into another; at the same time, fuel provides an apt metaphor for the situation of migrant workers in an exploitative society.⁵⁹

A similar illustration of the principle of permutation, whereby the toil and the work of the migrants is transformed into the sap that keeps the social and economic fabric moving, is found in the case of North African workers in Spain. In the last two decades, African migrants have consolidated the agricultural economies of southern Spanish provinces such as Almería and the Southeast, as Nini narrates in his journal. Like Mexican workers in the United States, Africans have found two of the soft spots of Spanish economy: construction and agriculture. The province of Almería has been aptly described as a sea of plastic, an uncanny mixture of desert and greenhouses, where the workers endure suffocating heat as well as the side effects of illegal work. To put it simply, as Martínez explained when trac-

ing the Mexican presence in the United States, these Africans are the only available manual laborers. The working conditions are extreme: Workers have no National Health Service coverage, work long hours, and are housed in subhuman conditions in huts or labor camps. Frequently, the employer offers housing but charges a fortune for the services provided. Even if they are needed in the greenhouses (since no Spaniard would accept that kind of job), Africans are not wanted outside the greenhouse.⁶⁰ Being outside the greenhouse simply means enjoying benefits and being registered to vote.

A decade of exploitation and de facto segregation exploded in El Ejido, a small town in the province of Almería, on February 6, 2000: A young woman was allegedly killed by a deranged Moroccan worker, and pent-up racial hatred burst out. Locals vandalized or torched stores and businesses run by Africans; cars with African passengers were stopped and overturned; a local organization that aids the migrants was vandalized; reporters were driven out of town; and Africans had to flee and take refuge in the nearby hills. After a week of striking to protest the attacks, Africans returned to the greenhouses. With their strike, Africans protested the passivity and the connivance of both the inhabitants of El Ejido and the police⁶¹ during the outbreak of violence. They also demonstrated how vital their labor was and how the economy of the agricultural business depended on their exploitation. Labor peace is easier to achieve, though, than social integration is. Surprisingly, as an editorial of *El País* argued, Spain, which has for decades supplied Europe and South America with a steady influx of migrants, does not seem culturally ready to accept the migrants who are currently fleeing from hunger and oppression in other parts of the world. Moreover, the structural mechanisms and the policies that should have been implemented have either failed or have not been created. Immigration, concluded the editorial, has been dealt with as if it were more a problem than a reality.⁶² The anti-immigrant violence in El Ejido illustrates how a problematic cultural, linguistic, and economic contact zone becomes more of a battlefield.

There are myriads of lines and fences within the battlefield. Without offering instances of violence between the two communities, in his journal Nini further explores and dissects the border of distrust—what he calls “a psychological block”⁶³—that separates Spaniards from North Africans. According to the widespread stereotype, the Moor is always suspicious, always dishonest, always a Moor. No matter what their regional or national differences, individuals are going to be reconstructed as the impersonation of the Moor/*el moro*, the Other associated with social problems, hash, crime

in its different forms, and, especially since the attacks of September 11, March 11, and July 7, terrorism. One would say that Spaniards construct this “devalued” Other because they do not know the real African. The problem is that interaction hardly changes that static narrative of the Other.⁶⁴ Nini provides an excellent example in the way Merche, one of his coworkers at the orange fields, fantasizes about the idea of the African as predator. Merche told the narrator and the other workers that sometimes she fantasized that they killed her, or stole her car, and then made a getaway. “Moors are capable of anything,”⁶⁵ she says, laughing. Since reality does not conform to the stereotype, Merche indulges in reverie, in what reality should really be like in order to adapt to the static narrative construction of the Moor. Presented in this oblique way, the stereotype loses all its consistency and becomes a mirror reflecting the speaker, whose thirst for the stereotype is frustrated. The potential for stealing, for performing this “anything,” with its overtones of destruction and looting, is precisely what the journal defies: There are no rapes and no sexual abuses; there are no Africans taking jobs from Spaniards, to rephrase Baca’s poem. What Merche and the reader find is a group of men trying to work under the most adverse circumstances. Like Viramontes’s characters, these workers are part of the “tar pit” which produces the fuel that keeps American and Spanish economies running. They are an essential part of the permutational system that transforms physical toil into the commodities of a consumer society that increasingly relies on cheap, flexible, and so-called “illegal” work. Yet there is no Garden of Eden waiting as payment for all the work; or, to put it another way, there is no green card in exchange for working in the greenhouse.

Permutational Dynamics, Hybrid Nations

When we talk about “crossing borders,” then, we need to supplement this process with a simultaneous one: the reinforcing of boundaries, physical discursive and historical, that the migrant encounters in the host country.⁶⁶ If the space of the borderlands does not necessarily reveal itself as the space of infinite creative potential, the question is, What are the possibilities that the border is a zone of self-fashioning, given the incredible hardships of crossing and working? Or under what circumstances can the border become a “free” zone of self-fashioning at a time of unstoppable mass migrations, migratory flows, and crossing of borders? Arjun Appadurai argues that as a result of the changes produced by these processes, “ethnicity, once a genie

contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders.”⁶⁷ The question is how these unstoppable processes and overflowing of borders will collide with the narratives of the Other and with the alleged downgrading of self and nation as a result of the contact. The latent belief behind this “downgrading” is that the hybrid—the result of genetic, cultural, and linguistic crossing—is a degradation of humanity, of culture, and of everything the West represents. Yet what voices such as Viramontes in the United States and Nini in Spain and Europe represent is the entrance of “denied” knowledges upon the dominant discourse of self and nation. Their texts counter static narratives of the Other as they perform another kind of permutation, a major and fundamental change within the definition of the nation itself. For based on the reasoning that through its multiple and repeating boundaries the system reveals its true face, it is possible to argue that border narratives reveal the discourses undergirding the definition of the nation. From this perspective, border stories immerse us in the grotesque and permeable body of the nation; they place us at a site where definitions do not hold, and where our bearings are constantly challenged, for it is always too hard to remember which side of the fence we are on. Through them we are reminded of the porosity of physical and narrative borders; the politically repressed parts of the world are set side by side with those that are presumed to be liberal, democratic, and civilized; the American and European dreams are hybridized with a vision of repressive practices that make the host countries strikingly similar to those other parts of the world the United States and Spain barricade themselves against. Like the border itself, we learn in border narratives, violence is displaced, spread out, and diasporic. Border narratives thus permute and shuffle definitions of self and Other, past and present, North and South. At the same time, they start the process of questioning the alleged purity of a nation that needs to fortify itself against the alleged downgrading brought about by southern migrants.

Notes

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- 1 Rachid Nini, *Diario de un ilegal (An Illegal's Journal)*, trans. G. F. Parrilla and M. Embarek (Madrid: Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo, 2002), 27.

- 2 Grégorie Deniau, "Yo llegé en patera," *El País semanal*, November 28, 2004, 52, 53.
- 3 Cornelius quoted in Alfonso Armada, "USA, Final del trayecto," *ABC*, October 24, 2004.
- 4 Deniau, "Yo llegé en patera," 44.
- 5 See Jesús Rodríguez, "El Estrecho de Gibraltar. Una alambrada entre dos mundos," *El País semanal*, October 25, 1997.
- 6 Rosaura Sánchez, "Mapping the Spanish Language along a Multiethnic and Multilingual Border," in *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy and Society*, ed. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres (London: Blackwell, 1998), 107.
- 7 Alfred Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 94.
- 8 See Jesús Benito and Ana Maria Manzananas, "Border(lands) and Border Writing: Introductory Essay," in *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands*, ed. Jesús Benito and Ana Maria Manzananas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 5.
- 9 See Pablo Vila, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the US-Mexico Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 8.
- 10 Rubén Martínez, *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (New York: Picador, 2001), 17.
- 11 Mahi Binebine in Ignacio Cambrero, "El estrecho de Gibraltar es un abismo," *El País*, October 31, 1999.
- 12 Armada, "USA, Final."
- 13 Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics*, 92.
- 14 The problems of comparing both borders are clear from the start. As many critics have argued, there are obvious dangers in abstracting and metaphorizing the U.S.-Mexican border—even more than with other international borders. See, for example, Debra Castillo and Rosario Tabuenca in *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 3; Claire Fox in *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1; and David E. Johnson and Scott Michaelsen, eds., *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3. Yet I am persuaded that it is possible to identify similar border dynamics without endangering the specificity of each locality and historical process.
- 15 "I'd rather die than put up with the misery I have to live with there" (my translation). Alfonso Armada, "USA, Final."
- 16 "I'd rather be locked up in a room, in a jail in Europe, where I'll have a meal everyday, than stay in Africa, and above all in Morocco. This is hell, and Europe will be paradise" (my translation). Deniau, "Yo llegé en patera."
- 17 Nancy Gibbs, "A Whole New World," *Time*, June 11, 2001, 39–40.
- 18 Alí Lmrabet, "Así crucé el Estrecho," *El País*, October 1, 2000.
- 19 Benito and Manzananas, "Border(lands)," 6.
- 20 Luis Alberto Urrea, *Across the Wire* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 13.
- 21 Martínez, *Crossing Over*, 277–78.
- 22 "La patera en la que murieron 12 subsaharianos fue usada como cebo para 'colar' otra con marroquíes," *El País digital*, June 16, 2005, available at www.elpais.es (accessed July 1, 2005).

- 23 "Las mafias venden 'bonos' de tres intentos para cruzar el Estrecho," *El País digital*, October 22, 2001, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 6, 2002).
- 24 Tomás Bárbulo, "El veneno que viaja en las pateras," *El País digital*, July 17, 2001, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 1, 2005).
- 25 Lmrabet, "Así crucé."
- 26 Gibbs, "A Whole New World," 38.
- 27 Armada, "USA, final."
- 28 Terry McCarthy, "The Coyote's Game," *Time*, November 28, 2001, 58–59.
- 29 Tereixa Constenla, "Un padre blanco con claroscuros," *El País digital*, June 11, 2004, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 11, 2005).
- 30 Carmen Morán, "Samaritanos en el Estrecho," *El País digital*, June 12, 1999, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 15, 2005).
- 31 "Nuevo intento de asalto masivo de inmigrantes en la valla fronteriza de Melilla," *El País digital*, October 5, 2005, available at www.elpais.es (accessed October 5, 2005).
- 32 Martínez, *Crossing Over*, 5, 319.
- 33 Wayne A. Cornelius, "Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Control Policy," *Population and Development Review* 27.4 (2001): 675–76.
- 34 "Volunteers to Patrol Arizona," *New York Times*, April 2, 2005, available at www.nytimes.com (accessed April 2, 2005).
- 35 Martínez, *Crossing Over*, 198–99.
- 36 Cornelius, "Death at the Border," 668. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 37 Omar G. Encarnación, "The Politics of Immigration: Why Spain Is Different," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 15.4 (2004): 175.
- 38 Nini, *Diario*, 83.
- 39 Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, "Aztlán y Al-Andalus: La idea del retorno en dos literaturas inmigrantes," *La palabra y El Hombre* 120 (2001): 31.
- 40 José Piedra, "The Black Stud's Spanish Birth," *Callaloo* 16 (1993): 822. Apart from the eight centuries of Muslim domination of the Spanish Peninsula, it is worth recalling that Spain holds two autonomous cities, Ceuta and Melilla, on the northern coast of Africa.
- 41 María de la Luz Ibarra, "Buscando la Vida: Mexican Immigrant Women's Memories of Home, Yearning, and Border Crossings," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24.2 (2003): 262.
- 42 Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicano Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 50.
- 43 Nini, *Diario*, 145.
- 44 Nini interviewed by Trinidad de León-Sotelo, ABC, June 12, 2002.
- 45 Martínez, *Crossing Over*, 7.
- 46 Benito and Manzananas, "Border(lands)," 7–8.
- 47 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 48 Benito and Manzananas, "Border(lands)," 8.
- 49 Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics*, 92.
- 50 "He detested the undocumented. But he adored and needed them. Without them, damn it, there would be no budget for helicopters, radars, powerful nocturnal infrared lights,

- bazookas, guns. . . . Let them come. . . . Let them keep on coming by the millions, the prayed, so that my life can be meaningful. We have to keep on playing the innocent victim" (my translation). Fuentes, *La frontera*, 268.
- 51 Eduardo Galeano, "In Defense of the Word," in *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multicultural Literacy* (1988): 114.
- 52 The detention camps in Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish cities in north Africa, also represent the underside of the European dream. There thousands of African refugees, often housed in subhuman conditions, keep waiting for a chance to reach Spanish territory. The situation of the sub-Saharanans awaiting on the Moroccan side for an opportunity to cross into Spanish territory is even more dramatic. Harassed by Moroccan authorities, they take every opportunity to launch an assault on the Spanish-Moroccan border. Although the border is furnished with the latest technology, the Africans equip themselves with handmade ladders in order to climb over the fence. See Tomás Bárbulo, "La Guardia Civil frena una entrada masiva de inmigrantes en Melilla," *El País digital*, August 27, 2005, available at www.elpais.es (accessed August 28, 2005).
- 53 In Cambrero, "El Estrecho."
- 54 Jimmy Santiago Baca, "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans," in *Literature, Class, and Culture*, ed. Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald (New York: Longman, 2001), 139. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 55 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 16.
- 56 Walter D. Mignolo, *Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking: Local Histories, Global Designs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 12.
- 57 Martínez, *Crossing Over*, 384. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 58 Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 87. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 59 Paula M. C. Moya, *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 195.
- 60 Juan Goytisolo and Sami Nair, "Contra la razón de la fuerza," *El País digital*, February 2, 2000, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 6, 2002).
- 61 Encarnación, "The Politics of Immigration," 173.
- 62 "Xenofobia y ambigüedad," *El País digital*, February 13, 2000, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 6, 2002).
- 63 In Miguel Mora, "Un repaso a la España clandestina," *El País digital*, June 14, 2002, available at www.elpais.es (accessed June 15, 2002).
- 64 See Vila, *Crossing Borders*, 223.
- 65 Nini, *Diario*, 15.
- 66 Vila, *Crossing Borders*, 8.
- 67 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 41.

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